

“Dreams”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Pentecost – May 28, 2023

Acts 2:1-21

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I’m going to preach a different kind of sermon today. I want to share with you what being your pastor has taught me, and how you are a big part of where I’m going next.

I used to dream about saving the world. I’d sit in the school library, where I skipped lunch because I didn’t want to sit alone in the cafeteria, and I’d dream about being a hero. I’d dream about a bad guy bursting into the library, and I’d save the day. I’d be brave, and strong, and loved—all the things I was so sure I wasn’t.

I wanted, more than anything, to do something important. I remember sitting with my pastor in his study. I was in high school, trying to figure out the impossible: my future. He asked me what I wanted to be, and I replied, “Famous.” I didn’t mean famous like a movie star or a billionaire. I wanted to be like Martin Luther King Jr., like Gandhi, like Peter. I wanted to inspire people. I wanted to shape the course of history. I wanted to grab hold of this broken world and make it better—and maybe in the process make me better.

I didn’t want to feel small anymore.

I dreamed of something glorious like Pentecost. A sound from heaven, “like the rush of a violent wind.” “Divided tongues, as of fire.” All are filled with the Holy Spirit and speak in different languages. Peter raises his voice, and thousands of people commit to a life of faith.

I thought that surely if I could just preach well enough, organize smartly enough, be good enough, the people would rally. Faith would abound. A fire would start that would change the world.

And so, I judged my worth by my achievements, by awards and grades, by my work and productivity, anything that made me feel... big. It’s the song so many of us sing in the United States: work hard, be great, achieve.

There’s a problem with that dream, though. A couple problems, actually. It was my dream, not God’s. It came from a place of pain, not abundance. It wasn’t Pentecost; it was Babel—the tower the people build in Genesis to scale the heavens. And it was never enough. No matter how tall I built that tower, I still felt small inside.

Luke, the author of Acts, tells us this will happen. Even when this great thing occurs, this thing we all hope for, this movement of the Spirit, it’s still not enough for many of the people. They still don’t understand or appreciate it. They “sneer” and suggest that the disciples are drunk.

And of course the drama of Pentecost is but one moment, preceded and followed by many quieter days, as the disciples go about the business of daily trying to live out God's love. If we overlook that and see only the glory, we may—when confronted with the mundaneness of life and faith—make the mistake of thinking we've failed or God has failed. We may give up too easily, off to chase some other high.

Here's some good news, though: God can use anything. God used that feeling inside me and called me into ministry to stand beside those who have been made to feel small, to walk those valleys with them. Just like Peter says, God gave me a new dream. It began in seminary, as I ministered in prisons and hospitals, but it took shape most fully here, among you—you who love each other fiercely. Being your pastor, I have sat with you in my study, in your homes, in meetings and along hospital beds and at graves. I have held your hand. I have prayed with you. I have talked about God with you. I have walked through the woods with you, served food with you at soup kitchens, protested injustice with you. I have seen you cook meals, and knit blankets, and come to funerals and baptisms, and sing hymns, and give of yourselves day after day.

What I've learned over time, and really am still learning, is that there is power in what is small. There is glory in a cookie. There is justice in a hug. There is God in the human. What matter are the small exchanges of love, not the things that garner attention, but the unnoticed little moments of God in people caring for each other. It's the stuff you can't put on a resume or hang on a wall. It's the stuff they don't give trophies for or write history books about. Though they should, because all those big historical movements of change, they were rooted in the thousands of hours of people whose names we will never know doing the daily work, the small gestures of love and dignity, of justice and defiance.

You've taught me that. You helped me find that dream. And though that dream is now taking me from you, you will always be a part of me. I wanted to show you God. But in the end, it was you who showed me God.

If my pastor were to ask me now what I want to do with my life, I would give him a different answer. I would say that I want to love more. That is my calling. To take care of someone. To do something that probably won't change the world, won't embellish a resume or win any awards or earn any fame, won't spawn a revival; it's just a son walking with his dad, taking care of his children, giving his wife a chance to do what she loves. For a time, I'll get to do what you've done: be a part of a worshiping community that meets God in service to others. And whenever I am called to my next ministry, I think I will be more at peace.

This, in truth, is the story of Pentecost. This isn't a day about the apostles becoming powerful. It's a day about the power of the Spirit and their relinquishing to it. And through that power, the Spirit leads to something both mundane *and* world-changing. The Spirit leads to connection. It empowers the people to understand each other.

It makes the people dream.

Yes, there is cosmic here, the world changing, but it's situated in the context of the small, little acts of ministry: breaking bread together, worshipping, learning and teaching, sharing with those in need. In those small, little acts, God does something great.

It's like that poem "Auguries of Innocence" written by William Blake: "To see a World in a Grain of Sand and a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand and Eternity in an hour."

This is grace: to know that, even being small, we are enough; we contain, in the words of Whitman, "multitudes." We are the earthen jars from which pour the waters of God. We are loved for who we are, as we are.

It is God's dream, not ours. The best times are the times we didn't plan or script. They are just open spaces where God dances between us—where God surprises us and gives us a dream.

What dream is God giving you? Whatever it is, may it be rooted in the small, daily exchanges of love, in the movements and grace (to borrow from Arundhati Roy) of the God of small things. Anyone can be heroic in a single moment. Anyone can create spectacle and grandeur. What's hard, and what's beautiful, and what is ultimately world changing, is a lifetime of daily devotion.

So let us dream of love. Let us dream of the hours that, though regarded as mundane by the world, are the stuff of wonder: a child, a poem, a protest sign, a warm meal, a tree, a church.
Amen.